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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 DOHA 001593

SIPDIS

INFO NSC FOR ABRAMS, DOD/OSD FOR SCHENKER AND MATHENY,
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [OA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)

SUBJECT: 9/17 MEETING WITH AL JAZEERA MANAGING DIRECTOR

REF: A. DOHA 1264

[B](#). THORNE-EMBASSY DOHA EMAIL 9/8/05

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Scott McGehee for reasons 1.4 (b&d)

[1](#). (SBU) Summary: PAO met 9/17 with Wadah Khanfar, Managing Director of Al Jazeera (AJ). The following topics were discussed:

Para 2: Khanfar's view of GWOT;
Para 3: A new entity: "The Al Jazeera Network"
Paras 4-7: Al Jazeera's relations with Arab governments (including Iraq's);
Paras 5: USG/AJ relations;
Paras 9-22: DIA's "unclassified snippets";
Para 23: AJ's Madrid correspondent, Taysir Alluni.

End summary.

Khanfar's view of GWOT

[2](#). (SBU) A Palestinian with Jordanian citizenship, Khanfar has been employed by AJ for the last eight years, having joined it a year after its establishment and becoming managing director in October 2003. Khanfar gave his views on U.S. policy in the region and vis a vis Al Jazeera, noting that until 9/11 Al Jazeera was regarded by the USG and the western world as a great asset and symbol of progress in the region. Following 9/11, Khanfar said the the USG's distinction between a war on terror and a war on Islam has not filtered down to the grass roots in the Arab world. He said the terminology "War on Terror" is unfortunate because the phenomenon it is designed to describe does not match conventional conceptions of war - with a beginning, a definable period of action, and an end. Khanfar referred to recent comments by Deputy Secretary Zoellick in which the latter referred to the "Struggle Against Violent Extremism." This formulation better meets the reality of the situation and avoids the polarizing affect of a phrase like "The War on Terror," said Khanfar. A key post-9/11 USG mistake was to take a page from Osama bin Laden's book and divide the world into two camps - "either with us, or against us," he added. Al Jazeera falls in neither camp nor - as a member of the international Fourth Estate with analytical and critical responsibilities - should it, said Khanfar.

New: The Al Jazeera Network

[3](#). (U) According to Khanfar, the Al Jazeera group has recently established the Al Jazeera Network (AJN), a legal entity that will oversee the growing number of Al Jazeera offshoots. AJN will retain the same executive leadership (chaired by Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer) as AJ and its role will be to ensure consistency of quality and message across the different offshoots, which now include Al Jazeera Arabic, Al Jazeera International (Ref A), Al Jazeera Children's Channel (septel reporting), Al Jazeera Sports and Al Jazeera Documentary, plus the AJ website, the Al Jazeera Media Training Center in Doha and the new Al Jazeera Center for Research and Studies. The latter, recently established in premises here in Doha, is a think-tank intended to analyze political, economic, social and other developments in the region from an "insider's viewpoint." There are few, if any, credible think-tanks in the region that play this role, said Khanfar. The Center has recently opened under the leadership of Mustafa Sawaq, an Algerian professor of English literature who until recently was a correspondent in Al Jazeera's London Bureau. Regarding Al Jazeera International, Khanfar said that AJ and AJI are currently in talks to determine the nature and extent of editorial collaboration between the two.

Al Jazeera's thorny relationships

[4](#). (SBU) PAO asked Khanfar how he views AJ-USG relations. Khanfar prefaced his response by noting that tension characterizes AJ's relations with many governments, not just the USG. He listed Iraq, Iran, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan and Egypt as current examples. He described as an aside AJ's problems with Algeria, saying they began when an AJ interview with President Bouteflika was unexpectedly terminated because

of breaking news, offending Bouteflika, who then cut off relations with AJ. AJ is in negotiations with Algeria to re-establish its presence in Algiers, and Khanfar implied that Bouteflika has made a repeat interview with him a condition of moving forward. Concerning Tunisia, Khanfar said AJ is free to visit Tunisia to report as stories develop but wants to establish a permanent correspondent in Tunisia. So far the Tunisian government has said it would grant a license only to a specific individual proposed by the government, an offer that AJ cannot accept, said Khanfar. On the other hand, he said, AJ has recently re-established its presence in Kuwait and has opened up offices for the first time in Bahrain and UAE. The only Gulf country where AJ is not present now is Saudi Arabia.

Relations with the USG

15. (C) Concerning relations with the USG, Khanfar said they were transformed by 9/11 and the subsequent US military action in Iraq. Both sides have made mistakes, he said, noting that the past nine years have represented a learning process for Al Jazeera, one that remains ongoing. A turning point in USG/AJ relations was reached earlier this year when detailed, practical exchanges began to take place between the two sides. AJ remains open to such input and indeed welcomes it, said Khanfar. "We have been more able to respond since we have received input. It is now a practical discussion, a much more healthy relationship," he said. There is more optimism now at Al Jazeera concerning the future of USG/AJ relations, however, he said, one USG perception that holds things back is that AJ has espoused a specifically anti-American strategy, so that each negligent mistake or evidence of bias by an individual reporter or anchor is viewed through this optic as part of a larger editorial conspiracy. "Al Jazeera is not there to be anti-American," said Khanfar. "Absolutely not."

Al Jazeera and Iraq?

16. (C) PAO asked for an update on AJ's status in Iraq. Khanfar responded that the Iraqi government had responded to AJ's request to return to Baghdad by setting "unacceptable conditions", including requiring AJ to sign on to restrictive guidelines governing reporting on issues relating to ethnic and sectarian groups. He said that in his opinion both the Kurdish and Sunni representation in the Iraqi government would be fine with AJ returning to Baghdad, but that the key opposition comes from Shi'a representative Abdel Aziz Al Hakim, of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, who is in turn influenced by Tehran, said Khanfar.

17. (SBU) Ironically, as well as the ire of governments, AJ sometimes simultaneously attracts the ire of extremists such as Al Qaeda's Al Zarqawi, said Khanfar, recalling that a recent prominent AJ news headline was "Rumsfeld and Al Zarqawi Attack Al Jazeera."

Daily quality assurance meeting

18. (C) Khanfar noted that he holds a daily 1pm meeting with an AJ quality assurance team entrusted with implementing AJ's code of ethics and conduct, which views and analyzes all Al Jazeera programming, looking for lapses in professionalism, balance and objectivity. "That meeting is very tight, tighter even than your list," said Khanfar. He noted that great progress has been achieved in many areas, particularly in discouraging reporters from inserting their own opinions into their field reports and in discouraging the use of value-laden language (e.g. "resistance" vs "military groups" or "occupation" vs "multinational force"). "Where there is a problem -- whether we learn about it from you, from our QA team, or from another source -- we fix it immediately," said Khanfar. Anchors and reporters are subject to a range of disciplinary actions for violating the AJ code of ethics and conduct, including being pulled from a particular program or beat, he said.

Reaction to DIA's "unclassified snippets" on AJ reporting in July

19. (C) PAO raised DIA's most recent unclassified snippets (Ref B) and asked for Khanfar's comments. Due to constraints of time, only some items were discussed. (Note: Per Ref B instructions, PAO did not leave a hard copy of the points with Khanfar, but told him that a hard copy had been left with the MFA. Khanfar complained that the MFA can take "two or three weeks" to send things over. Post recommends that NEA/ARPI seek permission to leave a hard copy of these points with Khanfar in future. He clearly takes them seriously and both sides would benefit from him having time and leisure to study and respond to them in a timely fashion. End note.) PAO

began the discussion by saying that although a sustained reduction in negative news coverage has been noted overall in the last several months, the USG remains concerned about AJ's continued broadcasting of insurgent-provided videos and airing of provocative interviews.

Rationale for airing insurgent-provided tapes

10. (C) Khanfar said this is a thorny problem with which Al Jazeera continues to wrestle. As of now, the policy is as follows: Each insurgent-provided tape should meet specific standards before any portion of it is aired, he said. The aired portion must be newsworthy; the material should not speak against specific people or organizations by name; and the aired portion must be placed in a critical analysis context by the program. For example, the most recent tape of Al Qaeda operative Al Zawahiri (dealing with the London attacks) was radically cut in broadcasting. "The tape was 28 minutes long and we aired two minutes," said Khanfar. Those two minutes contained practical information concerning the bombings, while the remainder was abstract commentary on Islam, the teachings of the Koran and reflections on Arab regimes. Also: "Airing these tapes is a way of demystifying the whole Al Qaeda mystique," said Khanfar. "The audience sees that these are issues you can criticize, and this does increase rationality in the audience."

July 27: Interview with Ali Belhadj of FIS

11. (U) DIA snippet: "On 27 July 2005, al-Jazeera interviewed Ali Belhadj, deputy chairman of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria about the recent murder of Algerian diplomats in Iraq by Abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's group. Rather than condemning the terrorist action, Belhadj said that, 'there is no solution to the occupation except through jihad and resistance. There is a gateway for freedom which is based on bloodshed... I am praying to God Almighty to help them conquer the occupation and the enemies...' After the interview, Algerian authorities arrested Belhadj for inciting violence."

12. (C) Khanfar's response: AJ categorically opposes the kidnapping of civilians, whatever their nationality, and when AJ includes kidnappings in its news programming, attempts to do so in ways that will lead to a positive resolution for victims. In this case, said Khanfar, AJ was told by Belhadj that he wished to broadcast a plea to the kidnappers to release the Algerian diplomat. However, he did not live up to this agreement and instead stated his support for the kidnapping while on air. "When we realized he was not sending the message we agreed on, we cut him off," said Khanfar. "That was at 4pm, the program was live. We then worked quickly to invite people to discuss his statements, disagreeing with him, and that was broadcast at 9:30pm the same day."

13. (C) Policy on kidnapping videos: Khanfar noted that AJ used to broadcast kidnapping videos as they were received, including the voices of both kidnappers and victims, but has now developed a specific more limited policy concerning such tapes. No more than 10-second segments are now broadcast, with no sound used from the tape - only comments by the anchor. "Most networks do the same, including BBC and Fox and sometimes our standard is even higher than theirs," said Khanfar.

July 27: Interview with Abu-Muhammad al-Maqdisi

14. (U) DIA snippet: "On 5 July 2005, al-Jazeera interviewed Abu-Muhammad al-Maqdisi, recently released from prison in Jordan, who claimed that Abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi was not the 'murderer portrayed by news agencies' but a 'brother who is concerned about religion anddevoted and kind to his brethren.' Al-Jazeera made no mention of al-Zarqawi's lethal attacks in Iraq."

15. (C) Khanfar's response: "We should have been rewarded for interviewing Al Maqdisi!" Khanfar said Al Maqdisi was the spiritual leader of Al Qaeda's Al Zarqawi. During the course of his imprisonment in Jordan, he revised many of his religious beliefs and reversed his position on key Al Qaeda points of doctrine. After being released, he gave a full-page interview to Al Hayat newspaper, detailing the ways in which his beliefs had changed, including the fact that he no longer believed that Islamic teachings support the killing of civilians, and this encouraged AJ to showcase him. Although he spoke in praise of Al Zarqawi in the July 27 AJ interview, the praise was a preface to cataloguing his disagreement with Al Zarqawi's modus operandi, said Khanfar. Following the interview, Al Zarqawi issued a tape criticizing Al Maqdisi and Al Jazeera, and saying the former had been brainwashed in prison. "The interview created havoc in Al Qaeda circles, it shed light on these Islamic issues and started an important

theological debate!" said Khanfar.

July 13: Suicide car bomber attack kills 28 children

16. (U) DIA snippet: "On 13 July 2005 a suicide car bomber attack in Baghdad killed 28 children in a Shia neighborhood. Al-Jazeera reporter Walid Khalid accurately reported that the car 'exploded before reaching US forces.' However, al-Jazeera reported that the attack killed only four civilians without mentioning the deaths of the children. Al-Jazeera downplayed a terrorist attack that killed numerous Iraqi children."

17. (C) Khanfar's response: "I noticed that report and I interfered to fix it," said Khanfar. AJ was criticized for the omission in that report by at least two other Arab newspapers, he said. He said that AJ has a policy of double-sourcing anything out of Iraq (since they do not have a bureau there) but that initial reports of that attack were both unclear and contradictory. Once the confusion was sorted out, AJ did report on the deaths of the children, said Khanfar.

18. (C) On downplaying insurgent atrocities: Khanfar categorically denied that AJ has a policy of downplaying or under-reporting attacks on civilians, citing its prominent headline and reporting on the recent attack on a Shi'a mosque in Baghdad as just one example.

July 6: Interview with Muthanna al-Dari

19. (U) DIA snippet: "On 6 July 2005, al-Jazeera interviewed Dr. Muthanna al-Dari from the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), who claimed that 'occupation forces arrested people and tied them down to explosives and blew them up before turning them over to their families the next day as dismembered bodies. Nobody talks about these things.' Al-Jazeera regularly interviews al-Dari and allows his extremist views to go unchallenged."

20. (C) Khanfar response: "Al-Dari holds a prominent position and is a well-established personality in the mainstream. He is constantly interviewed in the Arabic press -- you can see him everywhere and not just on Al Jazeera." Secondly, Khanfar said, as soon as al-Dari made that remark on the live show, AJ made strenuous efforts to locate a U.S. spokesperson to provide an opposing viewpoint. "We tried four times," said Khanfar. No one at CENTCOM would go on the record to contradict Al Dari, he said. "This happens all the time. We are live, 24 hours, seven days a week, we cannot anticipate when someone will say something extreme like that. We have to be able to get comments fast. We get tired of dialing. They promise to get back to us and they don't."

July 23: "Behind the News" - on the London bombings

21. (U) DIA snippet: "On al-Jazeera's 'Behind the News' program broadcast on 23 July, all three guests blamed US and British imperialistic policies for the London bombings -- not the terrorists. One guest suggested that Usama bin Ladin had a legitimate reason to fight 'the Western onslaught.'"

22. (SBU) Khanfar's response: He could not recall the episode in question but promised to look into it. "I take this seriously because I am responsible for this program," he said. (Note: It appears that the program is a special project of his. End note.)

Taysir Alluni

23. (SBU) PAO asked about the status of Al Jazeera correspondent Taysir Alluni, who was re-arrested in Madrid on 9/16. Khanfar said that the re-arrest is normal judicial procedure in Spain, preceding the issuance of a verdict in Alluni's case, expected on 9/18. He said a team of Al Jazeera lawyers had traveled to Spain and were optimistic that the remaining charge against Alluni would be dropped and he would be released.

Comment:

24. (C) Khanfar came across as energetic, articulate and thoughtful. He is clearly committed to bringing Al Jazeera up to professional international standards of journalism and (while emphasizing that USG criticism is just one source of input among many) seems to be not only open to criticism but to welcome it. He insisted on the need for a healthy tension between AJ and its critics -- the tension that he said should naturally exist between any news-gathering source and its objects of focus. He seems to be a practical individual, and clearly much prefers dealing with criticism that details dates and times and specific instances of lapses in professionalism, rather than broader abstractions. He appears very familiar with and closely involved in monitoring the daily content of Al Jazeera's programming. He encouraged

PAO to meet with the head of the AJ quality assurance department and we will take him up on this offer in the days to come.

MCGEHEE